

## Letter from Okulonyo 05

Dear Friends,

Last night I was kept awake by a rat chewing the corner of a 20 litre plastic water container that it usually takes me 4 days of drinking washing and bathing to get through. This morning, the dust on the hut floor had turned to mud and the jerrycan was empty. I'd only brought it inside to outwit the pig who the previous night had woken me as he pushed, nudged and toppled it over and then with enormous sucks and noisy grunts of pleasure began to empty it. Throughout the day, there's huge competition for water. Chickens and pigeons descend on any available drop. If you turn your back for a minute a goat will have drunk the soapy water from your dirty washing. Just as at Pilsdon and Hilfield we have afternoon tea as the heat goes out of the day, but drinking tea demands great vigilance as word gets round the local bee population that there's sweet lemongrass water to be had. Yes, water's precious in this dry and thirsty land.

This week we were on the edge of crisis as the pump on our local borehole broke down. The nearest other water is 7 miles away and some people already walk 4 miles to get water from us. Yes, you still see women and children with perfect posture, a can balanced on their head under a thin coil of cloth, walking for water. For us at the base, it's not a matter of life or death, as our motorbike and 2 cycles can carry enough drinking water from more distant places, but for the many with no transport and for the trees in our nursery which require a twice daily drenching, it is.

We heard of a man who might help us and sent an early morning motorbike courier to persuade him to come. By breakfast time our 'waterman' was sitting with us drinking tea, chewing groundnuts with his long legs jutting out of the low chair he was on. We quickly summoned our own people and men from the camp opposite and formed a circle around the bore hole. First the spout and pump handle were removed and then we began to heave the heavy water pipes out. 9 men gripped 3 long levers and we began to slowly haul the pipes up. Every 8 feet we unscrewed a pipe and finally 16 muddy pipes lay on the ground, the filter had been cleaned and new rubber seals fitted. Then much more quickly the rig was reassembled and pumping began. For the first 30 seconds nothing seemed to happen, then a great gurgle, a fart and to a mighty cheer muddy water spluttered forth. Slowly it cleared and dozens of muddy hands were washed under the flow, and life was restored for humans, beasts, insects and plants.

The washing of hands in Uganda is a lovely ritual and act of service. Before every meal here, the cook comes round with a battered enamel cup, and slowly pours water, rather like a server to the priest at the altar, over the hands of those waiting to eat. One cup somehow goes round 8 people, a real economy of grace, and then a prayer over the food. 2 reminders of just how precious and blessed life is.

Jonathan